

# A Crisis of Drowning

The Lake Victoria Drowning Prevention Project has been designed to mitigate the daily risks small-scale fishers in Tanzania face from occupational hazards

**D**rowning is a critical yet often overlooked global health issue, claiming an estimated 235,000 lives every year. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the burden of drowning is particularly severe, with the World Health Organization (WHO) reporting some of the highest mortality rates in the world in this region. Despite this alarming trend, data on drowning incidents remain limited, hindering effective policy and prevention efforts.

In Tanzania, Lake Victoria stands out as a high-risk area for small-scale fishers, who face daily threats. In response, the Lake Victoria Drowning Prevention Project (LVDPP) was launched in 2022 to mitigate these risks. The project is spearheaded by the Environmental Management and Economic Development Organization (EMEDO) in partnership with the Royan National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), along with other key international stakeholders like Irish Aid.

Lake Victoria is a vital economic resource, providing direct employment to approximately 200,000 fishers. However, this population faces significant dangers; drowning is a primary occupational hazard. A 2019 study funded by RNLI revealed that 84 per cent of adult drowning fatalities in communities surrounding the lake occurred during fishing activities. Further situational analysis, conducted in 2021 by EMEDO and Ipsos, a data acquisition and processing consultancy, highlighted several risk factors. This included limited awareness of water safety, inadequate access to personal flotation devices (PFDs), the poor condition of fishing vessels, limited swimming skills, and insufficient emergency-response options.

LVDPP aims to implement effective measures to protect fishers from drowning, generate locally relevant data

to inform policy, and position Tanzania as a model for drowning prevention in small-scale fisheries globally.

The project's primary focus is to design and test strategies that reduce the risk of drowning while providing the tools necessary for local communities to ensure safer fishing practices. The project has set a precedent in the region by aligning its initiatives with the broader global

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agenda of drowning prevention, setting benchmarks for similar projects worldwide. It encompasses several core activities designed to enhance water safety and reduce drowning incidents. Among these are:

- 1) **Community Water Safety Awareness:** Educational programmes have been launched to raise awareness about the risks of drowning and the importance of water safety practices.
- 2) **Strengthening Local Governance:** The project collaborates with local authorities to improve governance and establish regulations that prioritize drowning prevention.
- 3) **Improving Weather Reporting:** Accurate weather information is crucial for fishers' safety. The project has partnered with the Tanzania Meteorological Authority (TMA) to provide timely weather updates and install weatherboards in key locations like Goziba Island. These boards display critical forecasts using both text and symbols, trying to include all community members.

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EMEDO



Small-scale fishers, Lake Victoria, Tanzania. The devastating impact of drowning on Tanzanian communities, particularly among vulnerable fishing populations, necessitates urgent and co-ordinated action

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- 4) Emergency Response Training: Community-based emergency response systems have been established, equipping local teams with the skills needed to react swiftly to drowning incidents.
- 5) Formation of the National Drowning Prevention Network (NDPN): As a coalition of stakeholders committed to collaborative action on drowning prevention, the NDPN has played a pivotal role in advocating for national policies. The network has successfully influenced the government to develop a national strategy on drowning prevention, currently in its final drafting stage.

The UN General Assembly declared 25 July as World Drowning Prevention Day (WDPD) to spotlight the global drowning crisis. Since 2021, EMEDO has actively commemorated this day in Tanzania, organizing national and community-level events to raise awareness. The 2024 event at Kawe Beach in Dar es Salaam featured Umyy Hamis Nderiananga, deputy minister to the Prime Minister's Office, and brought together diverse stakeholders, including representatives from WHO, local NGOs, government leaders, and members of the fishing community.

The collaboration between EMEDO and TMA has been a cornerstone of the project's success, enhancing the dissemination of weather-related warnings, and integrating these alerts into community safety protocols. By improving access to reliable forecasts, fishers are better equipped to make

informed decisions, reducing the risk of accidents on the water.

The first National Drowning Prevention Symposium in Tanzania was held in September 2022 and served as a platform for stakeholders to discuss research findings and share best practices. This event underscored the importance of multi-sectoral collaboration in tackling the drowning crisis and highlighted the need for evidence-based approaches.

The devastating impact of drowning on Tanzanian communities, particularly among vulnerable fishing populations, necessitates urgent and co-ordinated action. WHO emphasizes that drowning is preventable through targeted, evidence-based interventions. Moving forward, there is a pressing need for the Tanzanian government, local authorities, NGOs and international partners to strengthen and scale up drowning-prevention initiatives. These include ensuring the availability of affordable safety gear, enhancing communication systems for weather updates, providing training on water safety and emergency response, and developing robust national policies.

By uniting efforts across sectors, we can create safer water environments, protect lives and support the livelihoods of fishing communities in Tanzania. The success of the ongoing LVDPP serves as a testament to what can be achieved when communities and organizations come together with a shared commitment to save lives. **3**